VIRGINIA G. PIPER CENTER *for* CREATIVE WRITING

NEWSLETTER

FALL 2004 VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

Letter from the Director

Welcome to the Premiere issue of the Virginia G. Piper Center Newsletter!

Our continuing programs and events for the next season are cause for much excitement. The 2004-05 Distinguished Visiting Writers Series hosts Gail Tsukiyama, Robert Pinsky, Charles Baxter, Edward Albee, Alexander McCall Smith, Beckian Fritz Goldberg, Stephen Cannell, Jana Bommersbach, E. L. Doctorow, Dave Smith, and Chase Twichell.

The 2005 ASU Writers Conference "Desert Nights, Rising Stars" will feature talents such as Billy Collins, Sarah Vowell, Jean Valentine, A. S. Byatt, Lee Gutkind, and Naomi Shihab Nye. It promises to be another sellout event, so be sure to register early.

Many of our visiting writers will be working with Creative Writing Program students through the Young Writers Program and other Piper Center Outreach efforts.

In addition to publishing our newsletter, we are making more changes and additions to our publications. With the Barrett Honors College, the Piper Center is launching *LUX*, a new undergraduate magazine. *Hayden's Ferry Review*'s Spring/Summer 2004 issue is now available featuring the work of James Turrell, C. D. Wright, and David St. John.

The Piper Center's goals are nothing less than to touch many lives in many ways by promoting the value that art is integral to all our lives and making it accessible to our community of writers and readers.

The adventure continues! Join us this season for our Distinguished Visiting Writers Series and Writers Conference, and stay tuned for more announcements of literary events. Visit our website for the latest news from the Piper Center at: www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter.

If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to contact me. The Piper Center's goal is to be responsive to our community and help promote our metropolitan community as a premier literary and cultural destination.

Special thanks go out to Maximilian Werner for his work as the editor for this premiere issue of our newsletter.

Best wishes for a great year.

Jewell Parker Rhodes

Contents:

Outreach

• In Spring 2004 ASU's Young Writers Program established a partnership with the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing in order to provide a multitude of creative writing opportunities for Arizona students and teachers.

• The Young Writers Program continues to train and mentor M.F.A. students in creative writing pedagogy, then places them as teaching artists in schools and community centers throughout Maricopa County. This year our M.F.A. students conducted numerous residencies impacting hundreds of elementary and middle school students.

• This past June, the Young Writers Program (YWP) successfully lead creative writing workshops for nearly one hundred Hispanic middle school and high school students in the "Early Start to College" program offered through ASU's Hispanic Border Leadership Institute (HBLI).

• YWP's *22 Across: An Anthology of Talented Youth* is now one of the Piper Center's publications along with *Hayden's Ferry Review* and ASU's new undergraduate magazine, *LUX*.

• The Young Writers Program in conjunction with the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing will begin offering creative writing pedagogy classes for middle school and high school teachers this coming year.

The Virginia G. Piper Writers House

The Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing will move into the newly renovated Piper Writers House during December 2004. The renovation of the Center is managed by DWL Architects, Phoenix, AZ. The Piper Writers House will be a gathering place for student and community writers and will house the offices of the Piper Center staff.


Amy Tan


Don Lee

The grand opening for the Piper Writers House will be February 3, 2005.

Special guests for the all day events include authors Amy Tan, E. L. Doctorow, Alberto Ríos, Norman Dubie, Ron Carlson, Beckian Fritz Goldberg, Jeannine Savard; and editors Joseph Witte of St. Martin's Press and Don Lee of *Ploughshares*.


E. L. Doctorow

Creative Writing Program

One of ASU's strongest interdisciplinary programs is creative writing. From the time of its formal establishment in 1976, the Arizona State University Creative Writing Program has been on a star-bound trajectory. Beginning with its first director, Norman Dubie, who joined ASU at age thirty-one having already published six books of poetry and taught at the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop, the program has attracted a highly productive and talented faculty that has gained it increasing national stature. Our current director, Ron Carlson, is no exception. He has taught writing at Arizona State University since 1986 where he is also Foundation Professor and a newly inaugurated Regents Professor.

In 1985, ASU began offering the M.F.A. degree in creative writing (replacing the M.A. degree with a creative writing emphasis). Just twelve years later, in 1997, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked the program among the top twenty in the country.

In addition to an outstanding faculty, ASU's M.F.A. in creative writing program is distinguished by its dual focus on developing students' skills both as writers and teachers as well as its emphasis on instilling in students a citizen-artist ethic. Housed in the English department in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the creative writing program is offered jointly by English and the Theatre department in the Herberger College of Fine Arts. Students may tailor their course of study to meet their individual needs, with an emphasis on fiction, poetry, or playwriting.

Piper Center Publications

• *22 Across*

In Fall 2004, the Piper Center and the Young Writers Program will publish the fourth volume of this yearly anthology of writing produced from the Young Writers Programs in K-12 schools. The Fall 2004 issue will be published in December 2004.

• *Hayden's Ferry Review*

The award-winning national literary and art magazine offers thirty graduate and undergraduate students hands-on editorial experience.

The Spring/Summer 2004 (Number 34) issue of the magazine includes poetry and interviews with David St. John and C. D. Wright; artwork and an interview with James Turrell, poetry by Chase Twichell and Frank Paino, and fiction by Barbara Nelson. The editors for Issue 34 were Charles Jensen and Sarah Vap, poetry; Kyla Carter and Josie Milliken, fiction; and Valerie Vidala Homer, art.

HFR's Fall/Winter 2004-05 Issue 35 is well underway featuring an interview with William Gass and a special section on metafiction. Editors for Issue 35 are Chris Becker and Eric Day, fiction; Laura Cruser and Brian Leary, poetry; and Kris Sanford, art. Issue 35 will be published in February 2005.

Subscriptions to the journal are $14.00 per year (two issues). Please contact HFR@asu.edu, for more information.

• *LUX—The Undergraduate Creative Review*

The Piper Center has partnered with the Barrett Honors College to publish ASU's annual undergraduate literary magazine offering twenty undergraduate students hands-on editorial experience and publishing only ASU undergraduate writing and art. The first issue will be published in February 2005. Editors for the premiere issue of *LUX* are; Christoper Yen, fiction; Jamie Forseth, poetry; and Lucia Bill, art and design.

Please visit the Piper Center website publications page at <http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/publications/> for more information on upcoming deadlines, special issues, and publication dates for *Hayden's Ferry Review, LUX,* and *22 Across.*

International Writers Exchange

• In January, 2004 the Piper Center began a program to provide intellectual, literary, creative, and cultural exchanges with the University of London-Royal Holloway and Warwick University. These exchanges will include conference participation, distinguished lectures, and faculty exchanges. Student university exchanges are expected to begin in Spring 2006.

• **MELISSA PRITCHARD** is spending the fall semester at the University of London-Royal Holloway as our first faculty exchange.

Piper Scholars

• The Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing is proud to announce the 2004 Piper Scholars:

MARIAN CROTTY The Theresa A. Wilhoit Fellowship in Creative Writing 2004.

Marian Crotty

The Theresa A. Wilhoit Fellowship is a competitive fellowship package for third-year M.F.A. students to devote themselves exclusively to writing and study during their thesis year.

• The Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing Summer Fellows Program for M.F.A. Students is a competitive summer stipend award for first and second year M.F.A. students to do research and creative activity.

Summer 2004 Recipients:
JEFF BAKER
KELLY HOULE
MICHELLE IWEN
JIMMY LO
VERONICA LUCERO
MICHELLE MARTINEZ
SEAN McCORMICK
JOSH RATHKAMP
EVA VALENCIA
SARAH VAP

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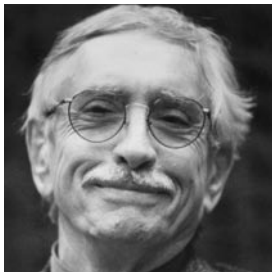
Q & A

Side-by-Side with our Fall 2004 Distinguished Visiting Writers—Gail Tsukiyama, Robert Pinsky, Charles Baxter, Edward Albee, and Alexander McCall Smith.




Many books are dedicated to demystifying the writer's process, or to paraphrasing the artistic work. These concerns are not treated here. Instead, the questions that follow are primarily intended to give these distinguished writers an opportunity to share their ideas about how art can behave as a tool for individual expression, and as a force capable of effecting global relevance. Of course, this notion raises other questions as well: What is the value of individual expression? How does art function on a global level? What is the nature of this unification? One possibility is that art arises through the interplay between the human imagination and the physical world, which is ultimately what makes it possible for us to talk about human universals, characteristic themes, and other commonalities as we find them both in life and in literature. Beneath the richness of world cultures, we are all naked searchers. I think the reader will agree that discussions of this kind are always timely. Although often and necessarily confrontational, insofar as art reveals and clarifies our shared complexity, it may (in contrast to dropping bombs, committing genocide, and other "failures of the imagination") accurately be described as a constructive act. In the spirit of linear drift, I have included several questions that emphasize this interdependence between writers and the world in which they live. I know these writers had little time to answer these questions, which is why I want to thank them for their generosity, and for their willingness to provide impromptu responses. The result is a menagerie of wit, recollection, nuance, and insight into the searching mind. **Maximilian Werner, Editor**

How has your writing changed over the years?

Gail Tsukiyama (GT): I hope that it has grown in depth and breath, gained a bit more wisdom along the way just as I would want for myself. I also think that I'm more apt to take steps in different directions and write with larger scope. After all, writing is a continuous learning experience.

Robert Pinsky (RP): All of my writing has been about the improvised, partial, patchwork, exhilaratingly daffy or menacingly savage nature of my culture, American culture. That has not changed. Neither has my reliance on the sounds of vowels and consonants as what I have to offer. But I'll make an arbitrary, semi-silly division into three periods:

As a high school failure—in the "Dumb Class" in the eighth grade, frequently suspended from school, gradually more able to get along with authority—I lived in dread of prolonged, dark frustration. A life as the gifted person who messed up everything.

My first book of poems, *Sadness And Happiness* was informed by my astonishment that I was OK: I had work, love, friendship, despite adolescent melancholy.

A point comes when early fears and obsessions are, if not exactly finished with, no longer the most urgent thing. One looks around, almost literally: as a famished animal finally looks up after filling itself. The question of what matters in the world becomes more important, apart from questions about oneself. The essay and the mock-essay became interesting forms to me. "An Explanation of America" is a book-length poem about the country, but also about connection: I had become a father, the book is addressed to a child.

But the apex of the triangle that has "oneself" and "the world" at its base is something like "interest" or "pleasure" or "art." In *History of My Heart*, *The Figured Wheel*, *Jersey Rain*, even in a sense in *The Inferno of Dante* the interest is in instruments of art, or pleasure—reflecting, maybe, an old guy's interest in having a good time?

Charles Baxter (CB): My poetry, like that of most poets, has gone from the slavishly imitative to more subtle forms of stealing. To come off as original really means that the poet has found ways to disguise his or her influences. Billy Collins I don't know. I try not to analyze my work the way I might analyze the work of other writers. Self-consciousness can be paralyzing for creative endeavors.

Edward Albee (EA): I suppose my craft is more under control.

Alexander McCall Smith (AMS): I think my writing has changed over the years in that I have become more confident in writing in my own voice. I think that this is one of the good things about books becoming successful—the author feels liberated.

How would you characterize the poetry or prose being written today, and how does your own work reflect that characterization?

GT: I think that some of it is very courageous—voices that are tackling big subjects with truth and conviction. I've listened to a lot of spoken/performance poetry lately, and I'm amazed at the honesty of these young voices. And, while I'm much more reticent, I think that we're all telling our truths, whatever that truth may be.

> "I think we teach by writing our stories, by sharing our varied experiences of how we live and who we are and thus gaining more understanding."
>
> **— Gail Tsukiyama**

RP: An artist is the last person to ask about trends, schools, "what is being written today"—the whole point is to do something uniquely desirable, unlike what is expected, right? So I don't feel able or suited to answer about "what is being written today." It is more or less my job to ignore that sort of question.

For pleasure and excitement, I mostly read very old literature. When I read contemporary work, I look for similar feelings of pleasure and excitement.

On the other hand, I think many of my contemporaries—for example, James McMichael, Louise Gluck, Frank Bidart, C. K. Williams, others as well—continue to write great work, that deserves to be read and remembered forever. But fortunately, poetry doesn't have the equivalent of art dealers or collectors to make us worry about what is "in" or not.

And fortunately, everyone knows that literary critics and speculators about trends and what's in or out mostly get it all wrong. (In the time of Keats and Hopkins and Shakespeare, the equivalents of the people who now write about those authors didn't pay much attention to them.)

AMS: I believe that my writing is perhaps a bit out of step with current trends in prose. It is sometimes seen as a bit old fashioned, but I do not mind that.

What do you see as the single most important function of art, and how do you think your own work fulfills that function?

GT: To tell the truth. I hope that every story I write carries the truth of the characters and the world I've created.

CB: Does art have a "function"? It's a question worth asking. Does art manage to accomplish anything and does it change the world? I don't know. Americans, whose culture tends toward the pragmatic, always like to think that everything has a use or a function. Certainly art should provide delight and laughter and memorability and understanding. But I don't think art has any one function in the way, for example, an automobile does, in getting a person from one place to another.

> "Get a poem by heart. Say a poem out loud. Study music. Teach every child to play an instrument. Technology is not the contrary or enemy of art."
>
> — Robert Pinsky

EA: Communication is the most important function, and that is what I attempt.

AMS: The purpose of art is to afford people the opportunity to achieve insights into the life that we lead in this world. It thus also has a very important spiritual purpose in that it allows people to develop a richer inner life.

What responsibility, if any, do writers have to voice their opinions about war and other related issues?

GT: A writer's responsibility is to their work, capturing the truth of what they're trying to say and bringing it to a reading audience. Everything else is what a reader gains from it. If the work should explore particular issues, then all the better. We as writers will always be voicing our opinions in one way or another, but my responsibility as a writer is to the work first.

CB: It depends on the writer, if s/he has strong opinions; if that person has them, then, like any citizen, s/he should voice those opinions. But writers have only one responsibility in regard to their opinions: to be articulate and persuasive. Fiction does not necessarily gain in importance by voicing opinions.

AMS: Writers do have a certain political responsibility. They must bear witness, but they should not overreach themselves in doing so.

Do you subscribe to a particular theory or understanding of language or art, and if so, would you describe what it involves?

GT: I'm a strong believer that less is always more. It has a great deal to do with having my roots in poetry.

What does it mean to know your subject?

GT: In my case, to embody a character and know which direction they'll walk.

RP: The occasion of the poem—a war, a nightingale in the back yard, a person you desire, a landscape, an atrocity, a death, a birth, a fear, a turn-on, a piece of paper blowing down the street, the invasion of the Post Office, the glory of the Lord—is not the subject of the poem. It is the occasion of the poem. The subject of the poem is created by the poem, and cannot be named except by reading the poem. The poem is the process of knowing that subject.

CB: To have observed it carefully, or to have imagined it fully.

AMS: It is very important that one should write about that which one knows. You should therefore ideally have direct experience of the sort of people and places about which you are writing. Without that there is a risk that ones descriptions will be shallow.

How do you make your personal experience useful to strangers?

RP: By certain arrangements of the sounds of consonants and vowels and sentences. By offering a surprise, or whatever is the opposite of a cliché. By thinking about my experience in relation to larger things. But mainly, by certain arrangements of the sounds.

CB: This question assumes that literature is useful. Sometimes it is, but often it has no obvious use at all.

EA: I translate it in to art.

If translated, would your work be meaningful to, say, an aboriginal tribe in New Guinea? Please explain.

GT: Yes, I would hope so. After all, while our cultures are different, the way we experience life as a humanity remains the same. Understanding will come in that connection.

RP: "Trans-latere" is to carry across: literally, translation is impossible. One cannot carry a meaning from language to language as one carries a loaf of bread from the bakery to the house.

"Bread" is a Germanic word in a language that mixes Germanic, Latinate, and French roots. The word rhymes with its fellow-Germanic "bed" and with Latinate past-tense verbs like "uninhabited."

Whatever the word for bread in the aboriginal language of New Guinea (if that culture had bread) might be, it will not have those attributes.

But I will be interested to read a poem in translation from that language, not simply for what it might tell me about New Guinea, but for what it might tell me about English, and America: how did my language need to buckle, warp, stretch, improvise, to accommodate this new meaning?

And if there is a maniac at all like me in that culture, she might be similarly interested in how her language might need to stretch, buckle, etc., to accommodate my "Samurai Song" or "Shirt" or "Impossible to Tell."

AMS: It should be the ambition of serious writing to be universal. It would be very gratifying to know that one's work crossed very deep cultural divides. Clearly, however, there will be limits to the extent to which an individual book can do this. I have been very fortunate in being translated into many languages, and I hope that the characters in my Botswana novels manage to speak effectively to people of very different cultural experience.

Do you see any limitations to your art? If so, what are the implications of those limitations?

GT: There's the great challenge of not allowing yourself to be pigeon-holed as one kind of writer. Being an Asian-American writer can be a difficulty in itself. Readers have the tendency to want the same kind of book from you.

It's also based on the business/commercial side of the publishing world. If you don't sell enough books, it becomes more difficult to write the next one. So, it's up to each of us as writers to step out of the box, and to find new ways to tell the stories we need to tell.

RP: My art is limited by how much I can do before I die. But subject and technique are infinite, I think.

How do you respond to the idea that the humanities are anthropocentric? Might the humanities be described as insular?

CB: This is what might be described as a hostile question. I'm not sure what fiction would be about if it weren't about human beings. I'm interested in human behavior, as I assume most readers are. "Insular" as compared to what? Video games?

> "Does art manage to accomplish anything and does it change the world? I don't know. Americans, whose culture tends toward the pragmatic, always like to think that everything has a use or a function."
>
> **— Charles Baxter**

RP: "The humanities are anthropocentric"? If I know what a tautology is, isn't that a tautology?

How could art be made more vital and useful to a public saturated in technology?

GT: I believe art is already vital and useful, and to be given more money and grants to performance and gallery shows might be one way. Also, continuing to publish voices with more cultural diversity might be another.

RP: Get a poem by heart. Say a poem out loud. Emulate the people in the videos at www.favoritepoem.org. Study music. Teach every child to play an instrument.

Technology is not the contrary or enemy of art.

CB: Perhaps the real question is: should the public be as saturated in technology as it seems to be? Art doesn't defeat technology by becoming more technological itself. That, at least, is certain.

How would you characterize the relationship between art and commerce as you have experienced it?

GT: As I answered earlier, it can be very limiting to the artistic creation. At the same time, it's a necessary evil in order to reach a greater public.

RP: I don't sneer at commerce.

In my experience, people who need to make a living, to show a profit, understand the needs and motives of art pretty well.

An artist tries to make something people will want. This is true of the manufacturer of lawn furniture and candy, too—though not necessarily of eminent academics or arts administrators.

The book-buying public sometimes behaves stupidly, but I am not sure it is not wiser than the committees that choose poet laureates, award prizes, etc. In my experience, the editors I deal with at Norton, Farrar Straus & Giroux, and at magazines are more sensitive to art, and have better literary judgment, than the people at English Departments, grant-giving organizations, etc.

CB: The artist does his best to sell his work. If he cannot sell it, he is probably not an artist.

AMS: Art and commerce can and do co-exist very successfully. I have never been pushed by commerce in a direction in which I did not wish to travel. However, one must be aware of the potential inroads which commerce may make on artistic integrity. I certainly feel that there are some instances in which commerce has distorted artistic goods very badly. Perhaps there will be more of a reaction to this in the future.

Is there a difference between the reality of your art and the reality of your life?

GT: Much. My characters are much more courageous than I am.

EA: The first is probably more real.

How do you think the concerns of American writers differ right now from the concerns of other writers in the world?

GT: I think we're actually closer to the interests of other writers in the world right now. For the first time, many are directly facing their same concerns dealing with the ongoing war and destruction.

> "Writers do have a certain political responsibility. They must bear witness, but they should not overreach themselves in doing so."
>
> **— Alexander McCall Smith**

RP: The first person plural that is the concern of any American—what "we" do, where "we" bomb, the needs and power of "our" economy, the promises and disappointments of "our" system and culture—that first person plural, in such pervasive ways, is the concern of American artists, too.

The dire condition of that first-person plural is our burden and opportunity.

CB: American writers tend not to be as interested in history as other world writers are, and American readers don't read enough foreign literature in translation or in the original language. European readers read much more than we do.

What do American writers have to teach other writers in the world? What might they learn?

GT: I think we teach by writing our stories, by sharing our varied experiences of how we live and who we are and thus gaining more understanding.

EA: The fragility of democracy. The dangers of intellectual sloth.

AMS: Any writer, of whatever nationality, should be open to the writings of others. In my view, the more that literature crosses national boundaries the better. Great literature, anyway, knows no national boundaries. I think it is a great pity if writers remain entrenched in a national school of literature or do not open their minds to what others abroad are writing. Their own writing will become insular and shallow if they do that. In particular, I think we writers who write in English should avoid the easy option of immersing ourselves only in that which other writers in English produce. We must be open, we must listen to all voices, particularly those which come to us from more vulnerable cultures. At the same time I think that one must keep up one's standards. I am not impressed by weak work just because it comes from somewhere exotic or under-represented. 🕮

> "Communication is the most important function, and that is what I attempt."
>
> **— Edward Albee**

GAIL TSUKIYAMA *was born in San Francisco, California to a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii. She attended San Francisco State University where she was the recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award. A resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, she has been a part-time lecturer in creative writing at San Francisco State University, as well as a freelance book reviewer for the* San Francisco Chronicle. *She has sat as a judge for the Kiriyama Book Prize and is currently Book Review Editor for the online magazine* Pacific Rim Voices. *Her novels include* Night of Many Dreams, The Langauge of Threads, *and* Dreaming Water.

ROBERT PINSKY *is a former Poet Laureate of the United States. His book* The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1965-1995 *was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry and also received the Lenore Marshall Award and the Ambassador Book Award of the English Speaking Union. Pinksy has co-translated poems by Czeslaw Milosz and published a new verse translation of* The Inferno of Dante. *He serves as poetry editor of the online journal* Slate *and a contributor to* The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer *on PBS. He teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University.*

CHARLES BAXTER *was born in Minneapolis and graduated from Macalester College in Saint Paul. After completing graduate work in English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, he taught for several years at Wayne State University in Detroit. In 1989, he moved to the Department of English at the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor and its M. F. A. program. He now teaches at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of four novels, four collections of short stories, three collections of poems, a collection of essays on fiction, and is the editor of other works.*

EDWARD ALBEE *has defined modern American theater with four decades of provocative, controversial and brilliant plays. Lauded as "one of the eternal innovators" in American drama, his most recent hit play,* The Goat, *won the 2002 Tony Award for Best Play. Albee is perhaps most well-known for his debut three-act drama* Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? *Released in 1962,* Virginia Woolf *was immediately recognized for its unabashedly honest dialogue and jarring interpretation of modern relationships. It won both the Tony and New York Drama Critics Circle Awards and is widely considered a classic of contemporary theater.*

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH *was born in Zimbabwe. He became a law professor in Scotland and later returned to Africa to work in Botswana, where he helped to set up a new law school at the University of Botswana. He has written more than fifty books, including specialist academic titles, short story collections, and children's books. His detective novel,* The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, *received two Booker Judge's Special Recommendations. McCall Smith recently finished the first book in a new series featuring detective Isabel Dalhousie called* Crushed Strawberry. *He is currently Professor of Medical Law at the University of Edinburgh.*

Invisible Skins

an Interview with Rigoberto González

An alumni of the M.F.A. program at ASU, **Rigoberto González** is the author of three books, *So Often the Pitcher Goes to Water Until It Breaks*, a 1998 National Poetry Series selection (University of Illinois Press, 1999); *Soledad Sigh-Sighs / Soledad Suspiros* (Children's Book Press, 2003), a bilingual children's book; and a novel, *Crossing Vines* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), which received *ForeWord Magazine*'s Editor's Choice for Fiction Book of the Year Award in 2004.

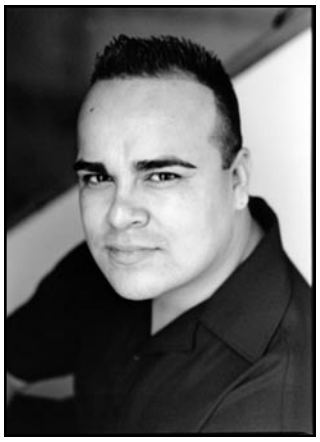
Maximilian Werner: One of the characteristics of your work is its sensuousness. It might even be said that your work drips and bleeds and sweats a good deal of the time. Could you talk a little about why sensuousness is so important to our understanding of the people that inhabit your poems and fiction? There are many ways to reveal a character or person. Why should the shape and the color of their lips, the sweat in the cup of their necks, or the poison-honey odor of their breath be important parts of that process?

Rigoberto González: I'm fascinated by the details of the body because they are the stories within a story. A cut, a scar, a welt, a bruise, a curl or dimple or birthmark, all have the potential to initiate a narrative or inspire a poem. And though I don't always begin a project with that premise, those small clues of who we are, where we've been and what we've done eventually creep onto the page. For the people I write about—usually laborers—the body is less an instrument of vanity than an instrument for survival. All the wear and tear and wear of the physical burdens leaves its history on those brown skins, so it's important for me to allow readers a more intimate look at these bodies. I want readers to focus past the occupations, past the uniforms, so that they can understand who these people are as individuals.

One of the strategies in writing the novel *Crossing Vines*, about the California grape pickers, was to show the farm workers performing every single bodily function and physical expression humanly possible. Readers become as conscious of the body as the laborers who are enduring hour after hour in the sweltering heat. I like to think of this strategy as a political act—an opening of the privileged eyes to let them see who they have been keeping invisible all this time.

MW: I see what you mean. So really the body is our language before language—a kind of metalanguage, if you will.

After all, isn't a scar a scar, and a welt a welt no matter who bares it? There is the story of how the scar came to be, of course, and that is what makes the people in your work unique. But then the scar itself is also a story, isn't it? A physical story. We may not share the same language, but we all have bodies that ache and breathe and scar and love. So even while the details of our wounds may differ, they are all wounds in the end. Which is interesting, because you mentioned "brown skins." Might this help to explain how you can tell your story as a Mexican-American, and still tell a story that, as you say, goes beyond the details or particulars of that story? Is this how you tell a story we can all care about?



RG: I become nervous talking about universality, because in the end this usually means that whatever is being talked about is being understood through the lens of the dominant group, i.e. through the lens of whiteness. But to keep it simple, yes, pain is pain and sorrow is sorrow no matter what and where. However, the experiences I write about are specific to the Mexican population, which is why I do say "brown skins," why I use untranslated Spanish in my work, and why my characters interact with themselves as themselves and not through the masks that Mexicans and Chicanos usually wear when interacting with white people. I rarely write those dialogues because they would be false: the people in my communities have minimal contact with non-Mexicans. Others are writing those stories, but that certainly isn't the reality of my family in Mexico or in the U.S., where they live in predominantly Mexican neighborhoods.

MW: Your comment about growing up reminds me of something you said earlier, about opening the eyes of the privileged to the realities of "invisible" people. Our readers may already know that you write poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, but what they may not know is that you also write children's' books as well, one of which, *Soledad Sigh-Sighs*, appeared not too long ago. What a wonderful place to begin teaching children about themselves and offering them alternative visions of the world. I imagine that opening children's eyes to issues of self-identity and diversity involves using very different strategies than those used to reach your adult audience. Assuming that you treat the same types of concerns in your children's' stories as you do in other genres, how do you make your concerns meaningful to children?

RG: Writing for children is as challenging as it is rewarding. Three of my poetry teachers (Gary Soto, Francisco X. Alarcon, and Pat Mora) are also well-respected and popular children's book authors, so it's not so surprising that their mentorship included teaching me (through their works) about this sensibility for a younger audience. But when I started writing my own books I wanted to set myself apart, so I decided to write books that deal with serious social issues. I worked with children for many years, as a dance instructor, a day care provider, and as a literacy teacher, and one important discovery for me was that children possess sophisticated minds. It is the adult world that insists on keeping them infantalized. In *Soledad Sigh-Sighs*, I write about the latchkey kid phenomenon and the loneliness of childhood; in *Antonio's Card*, I write about a child with same-sex parents; and in the third book (no title yet) I'm writing about a young boy with a sister who has Down's Syndrome. I believe these books should be occasions for adults to talk to children about the real world. I like to think that even through picture books I'm allowing people an opportunity to recognize what most of us would rather not talk about.

MW: You mentioned your reluctance to talk about the universals of human experience. If I understood you correctly, your concern is that the dominant group will determine what is considered universal or not. According to this view, "reality" is contingent on the ideas of those who are doing the defining. So I guess I'm wondering how it's possible to talk about the "real world" with children when no one really seems to know what the real world is. How do you define the real, and how do you escape the limitations of that definition?

RG: What I have to offer is my vision as a gay man of color. It's not the only lens into the world nor the most important, but that's the whole point, to maintain complexity and to challenge absolutes or notions of limits. I disagree that the real has limitations. Since our human experiences are so varied we have to come to terms with them through language

and imagination, which are also limitless. I trust in a child's ability to find a space for his or her own experience through the particulars of my picture books. It's no different than the expectation I hold for my adult readers who come from many backgrounds.

MW: Could you give us an example of how you "challenge absolutes" in your work?

RG: By giving voice to the voiceless. My poetry books are inhabited by people we may have seen or heard about, but not necessarily heard from: the woman who changes the hospital sheets, the man who fixes refrigerators, the woman who works in the doll factory—they have stories, not only functions. And their stories are so particular, I hope it's clear that if a second doll factory worker or refrigerator repairman were to speak, that story would be completely different. Individuality is important in my work: what these personas have in common is that they are working class Mexicans, but their oppressions, sorrows, burdens, etc., can't be lumped together otherwise. Each path is unique. And since my perspective is from the inside—as a person with sensitivity to these stories because I grew up among them—I'm presenting not the most authentic or definitive vision, but one of many. There is not one way to tell a story, but this is mine.

MW: How does your voice or story as a gay man of color differ from the voices of your personas? In other words, when you write a poem from your personal perspective, what do you write about, and how does that reflect your own need to give voice to the voiceless?

RG: I call my second book of poetry my "queer book" because it's the volume of poems I wrote from the perspective of gay men on either side of complicated relationships, usually abusive ones. It's informed by my own experience as a young man seeking answers about sexuality and desire outside of my ethnic community, which didn't provide me with a safe space to explore these issues. Homophobia is an unfortunate reality among Mexicans. Not all of these poems are personal testimonies, but certainly my growing knowledge and confusion about the intimate world between men fuels these voices, mine among them. I see *Butterfly Boy,* my memoir about this transition from a dangerous home to a dangerous relationship, as a companion to "Other Fugitives and Other Strangers." The memoir of course is all truth, as I remember or imagine it. One of the threads I explore in *Butterfly Boy* is how I came into writing. One reason was to overcome my shyness, to empower myself through print because I was this confused, angry young man who couldn't stand up or speak up for himself otherwise. From there I developed an affinity to channel others who were also silenced for whatever reason. I don't mean to say that I champion the underdog, but that those stories of struggle and survival are much more appealing to me. I relate to them, and by writing about them I learn something about myself. 🕮

> "What I have to offer is my vision as a gay man of color. It's not the only lens into the world nor the most important, but that's the whole point, to maintain complexity and to challenge absolutes or notions of limits."

Announcements

• Congratulations to C. D. Wright, who has been named a MacArthur Fellow for 2004 by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Ms. Wright visited ASU last fall as one of our Distinguished Visiting Writers and is also a member of the Piper Center Advisory Council. Ms. Wright will return to ASU to teach at the ASU Writers Conference–Desert Nights, Rising Stars from March 9 -12, 2005.

C. D. Wright

Preview of Spring 2005 issue

- Interview with Mary Gannon, Deputy Editor of *Poets and Writers Magazine*
- Q and A with C. D. Wright and Billy Collins
- Piper Book Club

The Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing is pleased to be part of a larger community of students, writers, readers, and literature enthusiasts of all kinds. As part of the Center's overall mission of providing opportunities to its members, **In Progress** was created to share glimpses into the forthcoming work of residential and visiting writers.

Jeannine Savard:

from a poem entitled "Woman Inclined Towards Gnosis"

: She read what mattered
was what she embodied. She believed in
the "feminine magnesia."

Jeannine Savard *is an Associate Professor of English at Arizona State University and has published two volumes of poetry:* Snow Water Cove *and* Trumpeter. *She is the recipient of the Jerome J. Shestack Prize for poetry from* The American Poetry Review *and the Carnegie Mellon Poetry Prize.*

Robert Hampson:

from the beacon

4 tony lopez

forgotten
in the bar
abandoned
women
sit amid
cross-currents
of voices
the continuing
possibilities
of narratives
hammerblows &
the sheering of
electric saws

Robert Hampson:

from "exit wound"

hide
your face
whispers of
the dead
hang in
the trees
at dawn
like birdsong
no address
& no remorse
without
a name
only your work
leaves its
signature

Robert Hampson *is a Professor of Modern Literature and Head of the English Department at Royal Holloway, University of London. His numerous publications include* Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity *and* Assembled Fugitives: Selected Poems, 1973-1998.

Alumni Liner Notes is devoted to spreading good news about our Creative Writing alumni. We are thrilled with the response for our first section, in fact we received more than we could publish in this issue. If you are an alumnus of the Creative Writing Program and are not represented on this page, or have more good news, please let us know, and please tell your former classmates that we want to hear from them at pipercenter.info@asu.edu. Please type "Alumni news" in the subject of your e-mail. Or, you can write to us at The Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, ASU, Box 875002, Tempe, AZ 85287-1502. Attn: Alumni news. We want to hear from you!

JORN AKE's (1999) first book of poetry, *Asleep in the Lightning Fields*, won the 2001 X. J. Kennedy Award. His second book, *The Circle Line*, will be published in 2005.

JENNIFER CHAPIS (B.A. 1995) is the founder of *Nightboat Books* (www.nightboat.org). She recently received NYU's Outstanding Teaching Award and has published poems in *McSweeney's,* and *Painted Bride Quarterly.* She also recently became engaged to Josh Goldfaden, a fiction writer from California.

MARY GANNON (1992) is deputy editor of *Poets & Writers Magazine a*nd co-editor of *The Practical Writer: From Inspiration to Publication*. Her poetry has appeared in the *Paris Review, Washington Square*, and *SHADE*.

MICHAEL GUERRA (2001) is a recipient of Oregon's Literary Fellowship and recently won *Mid-American Review*'s 2003 Sherwood Anderson Fiction Prize. He's working on a novel.

CATHERINE HAMMOND (1990) is moderator for Tempe Poetry in April, a reading series in its fifth season. Her website is www.hammondart.com.

MATTHEW HEIL (2002) is assistant editor of *Echo Magazine*, Arizona's largest gay and lesbian newsmagazine. His poem, "The Night Circus," was published in the Spring/Summer 2004 issue of *Hayden's Ferry Review*.

HERSHMAN JOHN teaches at Phoenix College. Recent publications include *O Taste and See: Food Poems* and a public art sculpture on Mill Avenue in Tempe, AZ—a poem set in a bronze roadrunner sculpture.

ROBERT JOHNSON (2003) is the Academic Advisor at Prescott College. His essay is forthcoming in *The Gettysburg Review*.

TAYARI JONES (2000) is the author of *Leaving Atlanta,* winner of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and *The Untelling,* published by Warner Books. Jones is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois.

ROBERT KRUT (1999) currently lives in Los Angeles, and teaches at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His poetry has appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Salt Hill, The Mid-American Review*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review*, among others.

WENDY MARSHALL's (2003) book, *William Beaudine: From Silents to Television,* will be published in December 2004 by Scarecrow Press as part of its Filmmaker Series.

MIGUEL MURPHY (2003) has poems soon to be published in *Hawai'i Review* and *Opus42*. Some of his poetry was also nominated for Pushcart prizes. He is currently teaching at Santa Monica College in California.

THOMAS LEGENDRE (1996) & ALLYSON STACK (1997) announce the birth of their daughter Nicole Legendre Stack who was born July 24, 2004, 9:45 p.m. 8 lbs., 3 oz. They live in Scotland.

PATRICIA MURPHY's (1996) manuscript, *Inevitable Flow,* was a finalist in the 2003 Carnegie Mellon University Press series and was also a semifinalist in the 2004 Alice James Beatrice Hawley Book Award.

IRENA PRAITIS (PH.D. 1999, MFA 2001) will be teaching in Lithuania as a Fulbright Scholar. Her book, *Touch* was published by Finishing Line Press this year.

GARY SHORT (1990) has published three books of poetry; *Theory of Twilight; Flying Over Sonny Liston*, which received The Western States Book Award; and *10 Moons and 13 Horses*.

JENNIFER SPIEGEL (2003) teaches at Grand Canyon University and continues to write and sometimes publish. In August 2004 she married a biochemistry guy!

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Your gift will support our student enrichment programs for M.F.A. students with writing and professional development opportunities.

VIRGINIA G. PIPER WRITERS CIRCLE - $5,000.00
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CONTRIBUTING FRIEND - $250.00
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Thank you for your contribution!

Gail Tsukiyama reading at Scottsdale Center for the Arts, October 8, 2004

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2004
Edward Albee – Gammage Theatre, ASU Campus (The Flinn Foundation Centennial Lecture) 7:30 p.m. **FREE**

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2004
Edward Albee – Galvin Theatre, ASU Campus (Getting at the Marrow: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* A Colloquium with Edward Albee) 5:30 p.m. **FREE**

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2004
Alexander McCall Smith – Old Main, Carson Ballroom, ASU Campus 7:30 p.m. **FREE**

TUESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2005
Stephen Cannell and Jana Bommersbach – Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Piper Theatre, 7:30 p.m. **TICKETS: $20.00**

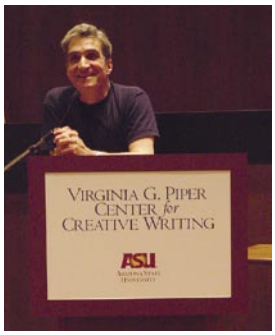
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2005
Piper Writers House Grand Opening

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2005
E. L. Doctorow – Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Piper Theatre, 7:30 p.m., **TICKETS: $20.00**

TUESDAY, MARCH 08, 2005
Dave Smith – Piper Writers House, ASU Campus 12 p.m. **FREE**

THURSDAY, APRIL 28, 2005
Beckian Fritz Goldberg and Chase Twichell – Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Stage 2, 7:30 p.m., **TICKETS: $10.00**

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9 — SATURDAY, MARCH 12, 2005
ASU Writers Conference – ASU Campus. Featuring A. S. Byatt, Denise Chavez, Billy Collins, C. D. Wright, Sarah Vowell, and many others.



Robert Pinsky during a Q & A at Armstrong Hall, October 11, 2004

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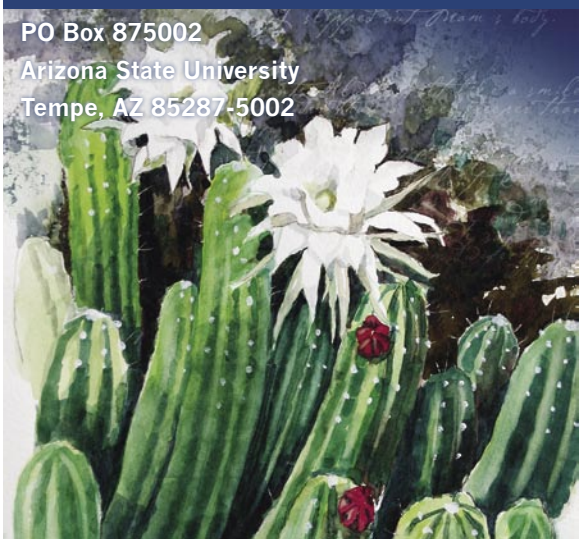
AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY



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